

Prevention Research Matters

Communities Working to Improve Physical Activity

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Latoya Simmons] Welcome to Prevention Research Matters. I'm your host, Latoya Simmons.

In Chicago, Illinois research shows that over 40 percent of children are overweight or obese. Dr. Sandy Slater is a researcher with the University of Illinois, Chicago Prevention Research Center. It's one of 26 academic research centers across the country that study how people and their communities can avoid or counter the risks for chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, obesity, and cancer. Welcome, Dr. Slater.

[Dr. Slater] Thank you for having me.

[Latoya Simmons] Dr. Slater, what are the communities in Chicago doing to help address childhood obesity?

[Dr. Slater] We know that children who are physically active every day are less likely to develop chronic diseases as adults, including obesity. To address the problem in Chicago, a new park improvement project helped get communities involved to improve areas for play and activity.

[Latoya Simmons] What happened when they did?

[Dr. Slater] One study showed that after the renovation of a group of parks, park use increased by 61 percent and physical activity increased by 37 percent.

[Latoya Simmons] That's impressive. So, how did the project work?

[Dr. Slater] A two-year study of local parks revealed that 300 playgrounds were in poor condition. These playgrounds qualified for funding from the Chicago Park District under its newly created Chicago Plays! Program. The program's goal was to empower residents to improve their neighborhood and health. So, the Chicago Park District and Friends of the Parks took applications to determine how to prioritize park renovations. We partnered with the Park District and the Friends of the Parks to evaluate the project's impact. In order to be selected, neighborhood groups had to show a high level of commitment.

[Latoya Simmons] Who made up the neighborhood groups and what did they do?

[Dr. Slater] Well, they were made up of church groups, block groups, and formalized park advisory councils who laced up their sneakers and went door-to-door to gather signatures for support. They also collected feedback from residents, which included information on playground design, new equipment installation, and on-going maintenance.

[Latoya Simmons] What did your study look at?

[Dr. Slater] We looked at 39 of the park and playground renovation projects in a wide variety of neighborhoods throughout Chicago. After renovation, these parks were compared with 39 parks that were not renovated to see which parks were used more. We monitored park use, after the renovation, from July through October 2013 and again 12 months later in 2014.

[Latoya Simmons] What was the bottom line impact?

[Dr. Slater] The renovated parks were used more than the parks that weren't renovated, and the amount of activity observed in the renovated parks also increased.

[Latoya Simmons] In your opinion, what's the main take-away from your research?

[Dr. Slater] It's getting neighborhood groups involved. They can have a big impact on park use and physical activity. Those who are making park and playground renovations in Chicago and other urban cities across the country can use this effective model.

[Latoya Simmons] Where can listeners get more information about the program?

[Dr. Slater] Listeners can go to IllinoisPRC.org. Under the research tab, they can click on Parks.

[Latoya Simmons] Thank you, Dr. Slater. I've been talking today with Dr. Sandy Slater from CDC's Prevention Research Center at the University of Illinois, Chicago, about an effective park renovation program that may help reduce childhood obesity and the risk for chronic diseases as adults.

Preventing and controlling chronic disease is *why* Prevention Research Matters.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit CDC.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.